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THE MORAL AND RELIGIOUS USES OF MECHANICAL EXHIBITIONS.

A

SERMON,

PREACHED BEFORE THE RELIGIOUS SOCIETY

WORSHIPING AT

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JAMAICA PLAIN,

SUNDAY MORNING, 24 SEPTEMBER, 1837,

BY

GEORGE WHITNEY,
Its Junior Minister.

BOSTON,
PRINTED AND PUBLISHED BY I. R. BUTTS,
No. 2, School Street.
1837.

TO THE

HON. STEPHEN FAIRBANKS,

PRESIDENT OF THE

Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association,

AND TO ALL ITS

MEMBERS AND PATRONS,

THIS

SERMON,

FOR THE SUGGESTION OF WHICH HE IS INDEBTED TO THEM,

IS INSCRIBED

IN HIGH ADMIRATION OF THE ARTS

THEY HAVE HONORED,

AND WITH THE PROFOUND RESPECT OF

THE AUTHOR.

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SERMON.

EXODUS XXXV, 31, 32, 33.

"AND HE HATH FILLED HIM WITH THE SPIRIT OF GOD, IN WISDOM, IN UNDERSTANDING AND IN KNOWLEDGE, AND IN ALL MANNER OF WORKMANSHIP; AND TO DEVISE CURIOUS WORKS, TO WORK IN GOLD AND IN SILVER, AND IN BRASS, AND IN THE CUTTING OF STONES TO SET THEM, AND IN CARVING OF WOOD TO MAKE ANY MANNER OF CUNNING WORK."

DURING the past week the inhabitants of our neighboring metropolis, and, without extravagance we may add also, more or less of our whole commonwealth, have been gathered to an unusual and most praise-worthy spectacle.* An institution standing, and standing deservedly among the honorable ones of the land, have invited the eyes of the community to an exhibition of the arts which they preside over and foster. The public mind has been,

*The first exhibition of the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association, to which the present Discourse alludes, was held in Boston, in Faneuil and Quincy Halls, commencing on Monday the 18th of September, 1837, and closing on Thursday, the 29th of the same month. The two halls were united together by a temporary arched wooden bridge, and each crowded with specimens, amounting to nearly twenty thousand, gathered from the various fields of human invention and labor. It was visited by forty thousand persons before the close of the first week.

and still is, very generally occupied by this interesting and many-faced picture. Many, perhaps most of those whom I address, have been up to this instructive and edifying Olympiad. I, too, have looked in common with you upon the beautiful and elevating pageant, and heard, as you doubtless did, the profound sermon which was preaching, the while, throughout those decorated, and to the reflecting and devout mind, solemn and sacred halls. And I feel unwilling that the season should pass away without a calm recurrence to its practical and salutary suggestions, to its religious and moral uses. Fitting place too for the theme is this temple of our solemnities, where we are used to ponder upon things that remind us of, and ally us with God,— where our great model is the master, who preached from the lilies of the field, and the ointment poured on his head, the bridal, the burial, and the tribute money, and taught us, as one after him filled with the inspirations of genius hath said, to "find tongues in trees, books in the running brooks, sermons in stones, and good in every thing."

I am to speak of the moral and religious benefits that grow out of this pleasant spectacle. But before attempting that, let a word be said at the threshold as we are waiting patiently with the crowd to be ushered in, for there is a striking thought that meets us here. There was a gigantic structure* in

* I refer to the Colosseum, so called according to some, from its enormous size, according to others from a colossal statue of Nero that stood in it. It was

the days, and at the heart of Imperial Rome, into which at stated periods gathered all the land to witness the disgusting contests of wild beasts, or the heart-sickening combats between savage men and the brutes, less savage, more true to their natures than they. Is the ancient and honorable pile where this spectacle is held, and to which we came up with the crowd, an imitation or a counterpart of that? Is it an edifice where beasts and men are, from time to time, fighting with an insane pleasure till they die, and those who are looking on are already morally dead? Not so. The multitude are going in to the great Cradle of Liberty, (expressive and beautiful name,) where the great and the good that have blessed our land and the world, have rocked into strength their own deathless achievements, and the liberty, civil and religious, that has inspirited and elevated man. They are going in to look, not upon degrading struggles and passionate death, but upon the exquisite specimens of the mind's calm life, and the all but godlike creations of ever living thought. Rome was then, at the period to which I have referred, the city most

built by Flavius Vespasian between A. D. 69 and 79, in the space of one year, and by captive Jews and Christians.

This building is 1641 feet in exterior circumference, and 157 feet in height. The arena, which conforms to the building itself, is oval, being 285 feet in length, 182 in width, and 743 in circumference.

The Colosseum was capable of containing upwards of one hundred thousand persons. The dedication by Titus consisted of a hundred days of games, during which five thousand wild beasts, and several thousand gladiators were slain. Its arena was in after times dyed yet deeper with the blood of Christian martyrs.

polished, most cultivated, most renowned on the face of the earth. I need not tell you that the soil on which the Cradle of Liberty rests, stands foremost, take the world over, in all these respects, now. The degrading exhibition, to which I have just alluded, was acted out and applauded less than eighteen centuries ago. The honorable one we have seen is in our own time. What an encouraging illustration, in the lapse of eighteen centuries, of the progress of public taste, feeling and morals!

And yet we need not look even so long a period back as this, to find cause for congratulation at the happy changes with which a good providence has been crowning human endeavors. This spectacle, in company with similar devices of modern times, has been gradually rooting out the boisterous and seducing holydays of older times, not removed beyond the memory of living men, and instituting more safe, more elevating and improving ones in their places. It speaks well for the good sense, the love of worthy and commendable pleasures, and the higher virtue of all classes of our community, when as the coarse and vulgar holydays of former times have died out, a spectacle like this of which we are speaking, attracts so much notice, and gathers round it so many admiring eyes. Regarded only as a substitute for the corrupting holydays we ourselves have seen, we may find in it great cause of thankfulness to God.

Furthermore, to the prophetic eye, there is an

invigorating hope inspired, and an almost divine promise given in what we have witnessed. We may see in it the pledge of still better things to come. The good man is apt sometimes to repine that in public affairs so little regard is paid to moral considerations. He mourns that the prizes are so rarely distributed according to the great principles of rectitude, duty and virtue. But the providence of God is moving all things forward by a steady march, and leading us onward towards the perfect. Step by step we approach the goal. By little and little, with a slow but certain advancement, we bring about the holy and the true. It would not more conflict with the public sentiment to be assured now that two centuries hence the public amusement would assume a still higher form, would consist in gathering together, for instance, to witness the prizes given out for moral worth on the heads of deserving ones, than it would long since the days of the gladiatorial shows of Rome, to have been apprised of the exhibition to which we have just been gathered. We may reasonably see in it, then, the pledge and promise of better things to come.

But let us not stand so long without. Let us go in once more, as we have already gone, and speak directly of the spectacle we have witnessed. Surely a most brilliant and imposing scene! how grand, how inspiring! gazed upon from the silent walls by revered faces, names that immortality has embalmed, whose praise has gone forth unto the ends of the earth, and whose record is on high, — and

above, and below, and around us, what a wonderful display! So much for human comfort — so much for the refined pleasures and chastened joys of life — so much to alleviate human suffering — so much to lighten toilsome labor — so much to operate directly and indirectly upon human virtue — so much to promote the honor of man and the glory of God. Can it all come from human contrivance and human labor? Can human hands so polish and perfect what is only needed for our earthly being? Who can look upon such manifestations of beauty, taste and skill with indifference or coldness? We may answer readily no one. The immortal soul has been constituted with the love of the beautiful; and whether this be manifested in mechanical skill, or in the human form, or in moral virtue, the heart springs to pay the inborn homage it feels.

I. In connection with this, therefore, I would remark in the first place, what may seem cursorily, and to many to be a radical evil, that such a spectacle, as the one we are considering, has a natural effect to awaken within us a feeling of dissatisfaction or discontent. We look upon these perfect specimens that are displayed to us with unmingled admiration, almost with awe. They seem to us like the fancied beauties that have sometimes come to us in our dreams. They look fairy-like and unearthly; and the feeling which rises spontaneously is not unlike that, which, moralists tell us, fills the young maiden's breast after revelling days and

nights in the painted fortunes of the heroine of a novel or romance. We feel not a little discontented with common things, and begin to aspire to something better perhaps than common life affords. What is put into our hands for daily use looks like a coarse, poverty-stricken thing. It has not the polish, or the fine taste, it does not fill the eye like the perfect model on which we have been looking. In a word, we feel an incentive and spur, working like an uneasy emotion within us, something that urges us onward, and will not let us be still.

Now this feeling may be misconstrued and mistaken, as it certainly may be abused. Let it not be too hastily condemned. If it makes us wickedly discontented with the sphere and the bounties, the powers and privileges Divine Providence grants us, the lot in fine in which, for the time being, we are cast, it has indeed been sadly turned to our hurt. Let every one pray and labor for the blessed virtue of contentment. But scarcely one in a thousand understands what contentment means. If it be wicked to grow uneasy, fretful and repining at our lot, it is quite as wicked to lose all Christian ambition, and to suffer the love of progress, of doing better and becoming better, and improving everything about us, to go out and die in the soul like the fading ember on a hearth of snow. Say not that a spiritless drudge, who walks from his wood-pile with his fagot to the chimney corner, and from that to his table, and from his table to his bed, who can feel no incentive to better things ever thrilling through his

veins, quickening his pulse or lifting the hairs upon his head, is the pattern of contentment. As well pronounce the decaying body contented because it lies quietly in the still grave, only yielding to the changes that corruption claims. No; the very feeling of discontent and dissatisfaction with all inferior things, which has come over us all, as we have gazed upon those exquisite works of art, is the surest pledge to us that we are God's children. I should fear for my child, if I could look through the covering of his heart, and perceive that this restless feeling was quenched out. I should fear that he would soon become the companion of the debased and corrupt, and creep it like a reptile through life. Abused the feeling may be. So may every good thing. Never let it be worn off. It is the stamp of God. It is a part of that sense of the perfect, which casts the clogs of earth from us, and lifts our eyes and hearts above to heaven and its blessedness.

II. I count this feeling, therefore, of dissatisfaction with inferior things far enough from an evil. As the spectacle we have witnessed quickens it in the public mind and makes it more alive and active, it will confer a blessing. In the second place it elevates and ennobles our views of man. We are prone in the dust and confusion of life — amidst the shavings of the workshop — in the smoke of the forge, by the steaming mortar, the anvil or the spade, to regard him only as a moving machine of muscles, blood and bones, strung together by the Creator, who works like a draught horse till he is worn out,

and then passes away. It is a wholesome lesson for us to go and look at the creations of his genius — the splendid fabrics his hands and his head have wrought out together — to ponder over the surpassing skill which a single implement of husbandry, for instance, saving time, saving labor, beautifully accomplishing its end, shows us to have existed in the mind of the designer. It gives us a kindlier view of the human soul, when we see how the artist has entered beforehand into all the wants and sufferings of sickness and bodily infirmity, and contrived the chair and the bed to ease their painfulness and assuage and shorten their bitter and dragging hours. As we look at the polished stick, or the steel trowel, (a knife for the bricks and a mirror for the face) it seems as if man had himself acquired the power which the gods were fabled to have given Midas, the old Phrygian monarch — and to have turned the dead wood and the black metal, if not to gold, at least almost to silver by his magic touch. And when we turn to the curious mechanism, so full of wonderful contrivances, and most subtle provisions, all but living and self-moving things, our views of humanity become exalted. We see something more than we are wont to imagine of the inventive and creative power of the human mind. They are ocular and palpable proofs of what the intellect is and can do. Man stands before us in something of the dignity with which his maker has invested him.

III. Connected with this also, the spectacle we are considering inspires within our own breasts, and

helps to spread abroad more dignified and worthy views of mechanical ability and effort. It inspires throughout the community a more becoming respect for those, who by the creations of genius, or the skilful fashioning of the hands, show that they are deserving of respect. It draws away the envious feelings from baubles and folly, and fixes them on what is truly dignified and of superior worth.

The world has ever been paying its homage to wealth and titles, and the show of the surface. Let it go and look upon those more beautiful badges than it has been so unworthily honoring, useful as well as beautiful, which the arts first make and then confer, more significant than star or belt, inspiring a deeper self-respect than king or lord can extort from the world, and then it will learn where at least one of the forms of true dignity lies. It will see it with him whose inheritance from the Creator is neither houses, nor gold, nor land, nor a name — but the strong powers of a capacious mind, and the better strength to use and apply them wisely and well; with him who by his ingenuity devises a blessing for the good of mankind, that lives out and rides over all the billows of time. The world is already learning this fast. Even now the trappings alone of the nobleman, if he can show no more, look more contemptible than rags by the side of the cunning artificer with his apron and chisel; for men are keenly discovering that though the former circulates among them his wealth, and so far does well, if he does no more the latter is the greater benefactor of the two. How

poor the empty distinctions look the world has for centuries been wrangling for, when put by the side of the creative genius which invents so small a matter as a card-making machine, marvellous work! which by the power of mind turns a piece of cold steel into the subtlety of the human finger, and saves the work of hundreds of hands in an hour! I have felt as I looked upon that, as if its inventor was covered with more purple and sat on a nobler throne than a king. Who can give us a rule or a weight to measure the honor that belongs to him who invented the art of printing, or who first made a screw? Who deserves the coronet and the laurel if *he* has no right to either, who takes part with his Maker in blessing the world by such a discovery as the mariner's compass or the combined wonders of the telescope? Christianity was given to man, let us remember, in part to wean him from the low and the worthless to the lofty and enduring; and whatever, like the spectacle we have seen, inspires in the common heart a stronger love for noble arts or useful inventions, or what may benefit man, lends a hand to the work Christ himself came to fulfil. The place it occupies is a sacred pulpit; it is silent preaching, moving the heart aright. It is all one eloquent sermon.

IV. And then, in the fourth place, how that imposing exhibition kindles afresh our faith in human ability and progress, and in the onward tendencies of things, and gives us new hope in the great race humanity is running! Who could take his stand in

the centre of that overwhelming scene, think that all these fabrics and works had been the creations of man beginning in the barren wilderness without workshop or tool, fashioning one thing after another and adding new and still better devices to the past;—who could cast his eye from wonder to wonder, and muse over the skill, the contrivance, the patience, the labor that had effected it all, and not feel profoundly awed before the achievements of man, not feel the beautiful words of Scripture rising to his lips, Thou hast made him but little lower than the angels; thou hast indeed crowned him, in the works of his own hands, with surpassing glory and honor?

Nor is this all. It is as impressive and as encouraging, perhaps a hundred fold more so, to reflect in what comparatively short periods changes of the deepest interest, improvements of wide spread influence, far reaching discoveries and creations have been brought about. What a sure and steady gradation we may observe from the rude savage life to the first half-barbarous efforts of civilized days, and then along in the improving track, from blessing to blessing, to the present hour! The thoughtful mind stands still and asks again, can all this improvement and progress be doomed ever to stop? Let the desponding one call to mind how recently astonishing changes in useful arts, or inventions, or new fabrics have been brought round or given to the world; let him couple with these the restless, inventive and forth-reaching capacities of the human mind, and the cloud of his despondency may roll away; new lights

will rise in the firmament of his hopes, (as to him who first cast the telescope into the sky new suns and countless worlds rose upon the astonished view,) and his fancy can hardly picture what tomorrow's sun may dawn upon or bring forth.

We are told that when King James the Sixth of Scotland, afterwards king of Britain, was about to be presented to the English ambassador, he gave two hundred guineas for the use of a pair of silk stockings which he borrowed, his minister having given him warning not to appear in the presence of that great personage in an unworthy costume. Down as late also as the year 1759, it was quite enough for him "who filled the measure of his country's glory," in a long invoice of greater and minor matters, which the oppression of the mechanic arts at home compelled him to seek beyond the sea, to order a single pair of the same article, and this not for himself but as a costly indulgence and present for his wife. In the thirteenth century,* history also tells us, kings even, for whom every luxury was sought, made use of straw in the chambers of their palaces. Two centuries after, in the refined land whence our fathers came out, the simple appendage of a chimney to the dwellings they called their homes, was a thing not only unused, but the very principle of its construction not generally known. And when the great father of our country was urging his way, a little more than fifty

* See N. A. Review for July, 1831, p. 99.

years ago, with all speed from Philadelphia, where the first Congress was seated, to the very city where this pageant has been shown forth, it was counted fortunate, trumpeted in the public prints and deemed almost an interposition of the divine hand, that no more than twelve days were expended on the journey. Go, thou who art distrustful and faithless, compare with these records of the past the revelations art has been making in those crowded halls; see the silk already cultivated and woven in this new inheritance — in the reign of the monarch, to whom I have just alluded, hardly known otherwise than as a wilderness; see its fabrics, and clothing, and ornaments, not by any means the costliest luxury to tempt our improvident daughters and sons; see not only beds of down, but curious contrivances making even down softer and easier, and all these, I had almost said, within the reach of the humblest; see a thousand, yea countless comforts for our homes, by the side of which a chimney, luxury and comfort as it once would have been, and sorrowful deprivation as its loss would now be, seems but as a very small concern; and then that all but omnipotent agent steam, in its myriad applications, before which distance dwindles to a span, and a thousand years, in what they effect, become as one day — go meditate among these wonderful things, gather up to the religious lecture, and feel as you must the inspirations of hope; look, as you certainly will, with a stronger faith upon that onward destiny which the world, no less than

its Maker, is promising it will unfailingly work out.

V. I might indeed speak of other and many more topics — of the impulse given to industry and thought; of the lessons to the indolent, improvident and wasteful, and long continue speaking as the thoughtful and curious mind is tempted to go often and meditate upon the exalting scene. But let me draw to a close, by observing, finally, that the spectacle, on which it has been the privilege of so many eyes to look, which, to my mind, for all its good influences should be regarded with thankfulness as a public blessing, and sought to be remembered and improved aright, when, like the fading hues of the rainbow, its once collected members are scattered abroad and its beautiful vision is passed away — has had also this natural and very powerful influence, to bring the thoughtful mind into a closer intimacy with God, and to render still more profound the feeling of awe and reverence with which his great name and character should be regarded.

I am well aware that by no means all have benefited their hearts, or grown any wiser, or felt any new impulses at this great exhibition. Some have gazed upon it only to muse in a vacant curiosity, and talk of profit and gain, and have thought only of their selfish ends, as the small-souled artist, we are told, looked upon the sublime fall of our western lakes and could be moved to no loftier contemplation than to dream of its mighty power to move the

mechanism of a mill. Some in their wickedness have gone there only as they go among the wider exhibitions of the goodness and beautiful creations of God, to abuse their privileges, basely to pilfer, to join the unholy and impure with the beautiful and the innocent, to mingle what is evil with what is good. We know that. Not so the many. Theirs are inspired and awed hearts. For while we thus move and wonder among the creations of man, we are irresistibly reminded of a mightier Creator than he. We pass from the short sighted devices of man to the mysteries and wonders of man's Creator and Lord. We turn from the narrow compass before us to the wider and boundless universe around us. The heart lifts itself in reverence, asking and asking vainly, yet bowing the more reverently, and filled with deeper awe as it asks, what must he the lofty one be, the Designer, the Creator and Mover of all, when his frail and feeble children, the creatures of an hour and of dust, can by their devices and cunning workmanship, awaken such high admiration, inspire so much absorbing interest? And so it should be. Let us be grateful for all that does it. We should ever turn from the works of human invention to the more sublime works of the divine hand; and from the admiration we feel for man, to a deeper veneration, a more profound reverence for the wisdom, greatness and glory of God.